ATS Biennial Meeting
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Theological Education panel discussion
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I would like, first, to thank whomever decided to invite me to be on this panel, and to confess how flattered I am to have been asked to speak for 40 million Mainline Protestants, although that number may be smaller today than it was yesterday, and more than four decades of parish ministry have taught me that one of the reasons we are Mainline protestants, is that we cannot abide anyone presuming to speak for any of us. We have become a fractious family, more so in recent ears than ever, it seems. We Presbyterians are gearing up for our biennial slug-fest called a General Assembly and before it is all over we will have been reminded that members of our relatively small ecclesial family have deep disagreement with one another that threaten to divide us once again.

In terms of Theological Education and the issues we are currently confronting, I am no expert: there are plenty of those, many of them in the room this afternoon. My modest credentials are that I am associated with a journal which for more than a century has kept a finger on the pulse of Christian theology, the life of the churches, and the interface of Christian faith and culture. Many, if not most of our contributing writers across the years have been and are involved in Theological Education, teaching, running seminaries, writing books for use in the classroom and study, and most of them are products of seminaries and Divinity Schools themselves. In addition, I have taught a bit, sat on a Board of Trustees and served as President of the Board of a Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I must also confess that I did not attend one of my denomination's seminaries, but ended up at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary, when those two institutions were part of an adventure in ecumenical theological education - the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of

Chicago, an experiment that came to an end a few months after I arrived. I came to Chicago at the recommendation of a wonderful college advisor to whom I confessed that I hadn't the slightest notion of what I would do with the rest of my life: I was reasonably certain that ministry was no one of the viable options. "Why", I asked him, "would I want to go to a school for ministers?" "Oh", he said, " You have it all wrong. They don't care about that at the U. of C. They don't care what you do with their education." - which turned out not to be entirely true and is not true at all today.

My experience chairing the Board of Trustees of McCormick Theological Seminary taught me, not only the challenges of budget realities and physical plant maintenance and improvement, staff management and faculty comings and goings, and regular expressions of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with he way the seminary was being run but also the state of the world in general, but also, happily, the amazing transformation of Mainline protest anti theological

education into a truly diverse, multicultural project.

The happiest responsibility of a board chair is to hand diplomas to graduates at Commencement. one of the best and most memorable experiences of my life was to watch them coming across the Chancel of Rockefeller Chapel, look each one in the eye and shake the hands and congratulate a startling diverse parade, so utterly unlike my own graduation as to be unbelievable: women and men in almost equal numbers, older and younger - a few in their mid-twenties but not many: African American, Hispanic, Asian American and Caucasian. I found tears in my eyes as I saw a new thing, a new creation if you will, a new thing God is creating in the world, now, in our time.

I live in the same neighborhood as the church from which I retired as pastor earlier this year. I promised not to interfere in any way, but I can’t help looking as I walk by on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. A few weeks ago I had to stop and ponder in amazement the information on the outdoor

menu board. That Sunday the preachers would be - at 8:00, Keri Allen, an African American woman, at 9:30 and 11:00 Joyce Shin, an Asian American woman: and at 4 Hardy Kim, an Asian American man: two women, one man, an African American and two Asian Americans. It wasn't all that long ago that all the names on that sign would have been of Caucasian males.

Dan Aleshire has eloquently reminded us of what we are becoming, and have already become, the Mainline Churches and this organization itself. I dare o believe that it is part of the promise of the Kingdom and part of the challenge we all face - a truly multi-racial, multi cultural society and church.

My own denomination has always held out for a "learned ministry" and from the beginning has represented the assumption that theological education happens in a graduate school, academic, residential setting.

Two developments are challenging that paradigm:

One: the cost of that model is increasingly prohibitive for many of the people who want it, who know themselves called by God to ministry but have very limited resources themselves. One of the unfortunate and in some ways tragic results is that many leave school and begin ministry with very significant debt. The even more unhappy reality is that many of the congregations where they might serve cannot afford to pay them.

Two: Many of the prospective seminary students are already working, married with children, at full-time jobs. Some of them are already in ministry of some form or another. Picking up and moving into an academic enclave for three or four years is simply not going to happen.

And so the Presbyterian Church and others have come up with inaccessible, affordable mode: Commissioned Lap Pastors. It is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, CLPs are serving faithfully and keeping small churches alive, many of

them racial/ethnic and rural parishes. On the other hand, CLPs, by their very nature do not have the academic experience, in languages, for instance, history, social ethical theory which, until now, we have insisted are prerequisite and necessary for the practice of ministry.

I confess that I am of mixed mind here. I do not claim to have a better idea, or an answer to the question. I'm not sure there is even a question. I do know that something new is happening - or something very old - or maybe a little of both.

I also know something that works, because I have seen it, and have experienced it myself. At the end of my first year at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, I found myself working two jobs, evenings and weekends, a wife and new baby, and an empty bank account A notice on the bulletin board announced an opportunity.."Student Pastor", small Union Church, 25 miles south of town, $50 a week, free use of the parsonage on half an acre". It was an

epiphany. If the earth didn't move the spirit certainly spoke.. $50 a week and a real house. For some reason, with absolutely no experience, and not at all sure I wanted to be a minister, I applied, and, God bless them, they offered me the job and I took it. So we moved and I started in acting like a minister, preaching, creating worship bulletins, teaching the adult class and confirmation class, visiting in the hospital, and, in my very first week, sitting in ICU beside Johnny Johnson's bed as he died… an experience absolutely remote from anything in my life, and then dealing with his shattered wife and son and conducting my first funeral.

I learned to be a minister by total immersion in ministry. I learned as I was sitting in class in Swift Hall listening to Joseph Sittler, Marcus Barth, James Nichols, Seward Hiltner lecture and then getting in my car and driving back to Dyer, Indiana, to work on Sunday's sermon, or to make a hospital call. Barbara Wheeler, good friend and one of the wisest people I know, said once, .."you learned to be a minister in your car, driving between The University of Chicago and your

church and community in Dyer, Indiana." "It worked for me, and sometime, somehow, in the middle of it, I experienced church, and fell in love with the church, not an abstraction - "the Institutional Church" we used to call it so dismissively, as we were observing its irrelevance, phoniness and imminent death, but those particular people.

I have seen a variation on the theme work extremely well… The Lilly Endowment Residents in Pastoral Ministry program. Fourth Presbyterian Church is fortunate to have been part of that good experiment almost from the beginning. Seminary graduates have spent two years, doing ministry, learning by doing, interacting with colleagues, and most importantly, with lay leaders' ordinary people in extraordinary life situations. They have gone on, after completing the two-year residency, to ordination and faithful, creative and effective ministries.

The late Don Browning who taught at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago thought a lot about the old

conundrum of "practical theology" vs. "real theology". He came up with some fascinating ideas. ""All theology is practical", he said.."Practical theology is not a subspecialty but theology as such." Browning argued that "practical thinking is the center of human thinking and theological and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking".. " We never move from theory to practice, even when it seems that we do. Theory is always embedded in practice"

So my dream, my vision for theological education… Seminaries, Divinity Schools that have sufficient resources to attract the very best scholars and the very best students because there would be no tuition, no cost, in fact… theological education available to any who want it and feel called to it and are qualified to be admitted. Is it realistic. Some are actually toying with the idea. In my own family it would mean upsetting an apple cart that has been in place for a very long time and has thousands of adherents who are loyal to their alma mater and committed to the stays quo. It would mean fewer seminaries, bringing together the

considerable resources each has. It is heresy, I know, but I continue to believe that our future looks something like that.

And in conjunction with those fewer, larger, financially strong institutions a matrix of "Teaching Parishes: where students would be in residence for part and maybe all the time they are in the process. Think of it…no more dormitories and attendant housing issues, real estate and maintenance and replacement and food services…students living in parishes, supervised by working pastors, who, themselves, are part of the faculty of the schools…students learning in the car or train as they travel between classroom and church.

It is, of course, a very long shot… but I find it exciting to think about and very hopeful.